



United States Department of Agriculture

Cooper Creek Watershed Project

Blue Ridge Ranger District, Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests

The Blue Ridge Ranger District of Chattahoochee-Oconee National Forests recently released an environmental assessment and draft decision for the Cooper Creek Watershed Project. The project is located southwest of Blairsville and just north of Suches, Ga., covering approximately 30,000 acres.

The purpose of the Cooper Creek Watershed project is to restore native plants and improve wildlife habitat. The intent is to provide a diversity of native plant communities and habitat conditions that support both game and non-game species including deer, turkey, grouse, songbirds, bats, birds of prey, and pollinators.



The primary focus is to make the forest more resilient and sustainable by reestablishing a healthy range of age and diversity of tree species, improving wildlife habitat and increasing watershed function.

The decision includes activities to: (1) restore native plant communities, (2) enhance wildlife habitat conditions, and (3) improve forest health.



Dense forests block sunlight from reaching the ground, limiting native grasses, wildflowers and other plants from growing.

Historically, fires were a natural part of the watershed and resulted in areas of open, park-like stands dominated by young oaks and grassy woodlands. Through extensive site analysis scientists determined forest conditions have substantially declined, with less than 1 percent of young forest remaining.



Young forests provide essential habitat for numerous songbirds, deer, wild turkey and ruffed grouse.



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Primary activities consist of controlled burning, forest stand improvement practices and targeted timber harvests over the next decade. Road reconstruction, temporary road construction, year round and seasonal road closures and changes to road maintenance levels will also be implemented through this decision.

These efforts will promote resiliency to wildfire and other climate stressors, resistance to insect and disease, and enhance forest sustainability over time.

The Cooper Creek watershed consists of over 30,000 acres, but only 1,397 acres (less than 5 percent of the watershed) are scheduled for commercial timber harvest and this acreage will be broken into smaller implementation units over space and time. Low to moderate-intensity controlled burning will cover just less than one-half of the watershed, but again will be broken into smaller implementation units over space and time.



This analysis and draft decision follows a deliberative, science-based approach with input across a wide spectrum of stakeholders. At every stage of this process, the Forest Service sought and responded to feedback provided by the public. The draft decision seeks to balance diverse interests. Changes to the decision based on public comments include:

Reserve areas for future old-growth: Adjusted the location of designated areas for future old-growth trees to better reflect a diversity of native plant communities and conditions.

Ecological focus on upland restoration: Prioritized timber harvest in upland areas where the ecological need to restore oak trees for wildlife habitat is greatest.

Restoring critical habitat to ridge tops: Focused on restoring open woodland conditions to ridge tops, allowing native grasses and wildflowers to grow that provide unique habitat and food sources for wildlife.

Restoring native plants: Minimizing herbicide use to only where necessary to promote grassy habitat or oak regeneration.



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